

Reflection and an Appetite for Experience: Theory to Classroom Practice

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Experience is openness to possibilities for seeing the world, one's place in it, and one's relation to the things that matter in that world. It is a process of questioning. It holds the potential for communion with others, and it promises to transform those who diligently engage in it. Investigating the nature of experience constitutes the heart of Hans-Georg Gadamer's (1990) text, *Truth and Method*. Gadamer (1990) explains:

Experience stands in an ineluctable opposition to knowledge and to the kind of instruction that follows from general theoretical or technical knowledge. The truth of experience always implies an orientation toward new experience The consummation of his experience, the perfection that we call "being experienced," does not consist in the fact that someone already knows everything and knows better than anyone else. Rather, the experienced person proves to be, on the contrary, someone who is radically undogmatic; who, because of the many experiences he has had and the knowledge he has drawn from them, is particularly well equipped to have new experiences and to learn from them. The dialectic of experience has its proper fulfillment not in definitive knowledge but in the openness to experience that is made possible by experience itself. (p. 355)

After years of reflecting on my own purpose as a teacher of composition, it was this study that revealed to me the heart of pedagogy. My goal in relation to my writing students is not to fix in them information, knowledge, or even a set of well-honed skills but to help them locate within themselves an attitude that moves beyond these apparent outcomes: an appetite for experience. The instigator of that appetite is reflection. Over time, reflection has the potential to transform novice writers and readers into experienced thinkers if we recognize its character and animation in our natures. Reflection is not a separate activity apart from ordinary experience—a special exercise for the last 20 minutes of class; it is a

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way of living. In the context of Gadamer's assertion, then, the validation and closure proffered by the sufficiency of discrete, graded writing courses must be subordinated to the experience of making and re-making texts. The goal of composition instruction should be not (only) to valorize the pragmatic—the assimilation of knowledge and composing behavior patterns—but to invite the “radically undogmatic”: the openness of the experienced person who maintains conflicts and yet discovers options for appropriate action.

Remaining open to possibilities for meaning and being is what the experienced thinker does best. In turn, reflection, or what phenomenologists call thinking, grounds such openness. What is reflection? I think of it as looking back to look forward. It is an activity always in process, always deliberating upon discrete acts in the past in relation to the unfolding present, impinging upon the actions of both the present and future. In this way, reflection is a constant repositioning of the thinker's place, never static, never complete. It mirrors the processes of writing and reading as composition instructors have come to understand them. Reflection is recursive, reiterative, and cumulative. In its pivotal role in considering past and present, and projecting future events, reflection has the potential to keep the channels to further experience open.

An indivisible part of reflection—looking back—is projection—a putting forward of possibilities—and Martin Heidegger's work offers insight into the projective power of reflection. The term “projection” has significance in Heidegger's phenomenological analysis of reflection or thinking. Thinking is not construed as a bundle of cognitive strands. In describing the interdependence of projection and thinking, Heidegger releases these processes from any commonplace analytic domain. Projection is the human being's continual, innate *function*; the human mode of being's function is to manifest possibilities for standing out in relation to its world. In *Being and Time*, Heidegger (1962) defines understanding as also innate, as the character of human beings that discloses to people their “own potentiality-for-Being” (p. 184). Concomitant with understanding—part of *its* nature—is projection. As innate human understanding is “altogether permeated with possibility” (Heidegger, 1962, p. 186), at any given instant, human beings project such possibilities. These possibilities are not always consciously thought; they are often more than the contents of the mind at any one given moment. They are what is possible but not yet known. Heidegger (1962) claims,

Projecting has nothing to do with comporting oneself towards a plan that has been thought out, and in accordance with which [a person] arranges [her or his] Being. On the contrary, any [person] has, as [a person] already projected [herself or himself]; as long as [a person] is, [she or he] is projecting. As long as it is, [the human mode of being] always has understood itself and always will understand itself in terms of possibilities. (p. 185)

Thinking for Heidegger, first, is a natural way of being, and, second, the dwelling place of untapped potential—a wellspring of possibilities. It is the richness of this dwelling place that students must experience. Heidegger (1962) invites us

to take seriously the invitation to “Become what you are . . . ” (p. 186), referring to each of us as a “Being-possible” (p. 185).

The way to remain open to the Janus-faced nature of reflection is to question. Gadamer (1990) states in *Truth and Method* that, “As the art of asking questions, dialectic proves its value because only the person who knows how to ask questions is able to persist in his questioning, which involves being able to preserve his orientation toward openness. The art of questioning is the art of questioning even further—i.e., the art of thinking” (p. 367). To reflect well demands the ability to pose questions. “When a question arises,” Gadamer claims, “it breaks open the being of the object, as it were” (p. 362): “To ask a question means to bring into the open” (p. 363). Gadamer does not refer here to questions with simple, apparent answers but instead to questions that bring a subject into a “state of indeterminacy, so that there is an equilibrium between pro and contra” (p. 363). “Every true question,” he concludes, “requires this openness” (p. 363). Consequently, in Gadamer’s words, “We cannot have experiences without asking questions” (p. 362). Freire and Faundez (1989) offers a similar but more urgent perspective:

Human existence, because it came into being through asking questions is at the root of change in the world. There is a radical element to existence, which is the radical act of asking questions I think it is important to note that there is an undeniable relationship between being surprised and asking questions, taking risks and existence. At root human existence involves surprise, questioning and risk. And, because of all this, it involves action and change. Bureaucratization, however, means adaptation with a minimum of risk, with no surprises, without asking questions. And so we have a pedagogy of answers, which is a pedagogy of adaptation, not a pedagogy of creativity. It does not encourage people to take the risk of inventing, or reinventing. For me, to refuse to take risks is the best way there is of denying human existence itself. (p. 40)

The phenomenology of reflection, then, is distinguished by exploring possibilities, questioning, opening oneself to one’s own and to others’ potentiality, and thinking. This experience is constitutive of being human. Why, then, is it so aggravating to students? Why do they chafe at thinking? Why are experiences that demand reflection frequently characterized by students as too hard or too boring? Even if we as teachers are convinced of the need to foreground reflection, we also will need to confront the resistance of many students to this experience. In my own speculation, there appear to be two roadblocks to reflection: first, the aesthetic of sufficiency that pervades learning—a desire for closure that is consistently rewarded—and, second, the characterization of education as a commodity. Years of traditional schooling have constructed these roadblocks. By the time they arrive at college, students are experts in sufficiency: they expect closure, and they certainly know and are quick to remind teachers when they have done enough. They are rewarded for sufficiency with (hopefully passing) grades and completed degrees. Courses that are accumulated for those degrees

proffer discrete tasks completed in limited time-frames; projects end with grades; whole programs of study conclude with unit-counts of courses tallied to a critical mass, ending in a numbered average. Students have come to expect teachers' assistance in delivering expedience to sufficiency, a patterned regimen designed for closure. This attitude promotes the second obstacle: learning in such constructs is a commodity, packaged in 15-week blocks, weighed, balanced, and measured like loads of bricks. Students perceive every course as a discrete entity—a different package, with a different packer, to be handled in discrete ways. An experience-resistant “thingliness” pervades their expectation of learning. This attitude stands in opposition to the nature of thinking I have described; it is even at odds with students' *own* natures. I suspect that this predisposition accounts for why, particularly in composition classes, there is so little carry-over in students' application of skills from one course to the next. In his introduction to Heidegger's set of lectures entitled *What Is Called Thinking?*, J. Glenn Gray (1968) defines the primacy Heidegger gives to thinking, and within this preface, Gray suggests three conditions that have the potential to move students beyond their demand for sufficiency to an appetite for experience unencumbered by the expectation of a fixed commodity:

[Thinking] is a gathering and focusing of our whole selves on what lies before us and a taking to heart and mind these particular things before us in order to discover in them their essential nature and truth. Learning how to think can obviously aid us in this discovery . . . *Only the thinking that is truly involved, patient, and disciplined by long practice can come to know either the hidden or disclosed character of truth.* [italics added]. (p. xi)

Genuine involvement, patience, and disciplined practice open the path for thinking. This is a meditative, reflective stance. However, students grow impatient with processes that seem to them such annoyingly ineffable experiences, and the time required for learning seems impossibly inefficient. What, then, can make learners already predisposed to quick closure more patient? What will make them stay open to experience? The solution, if it so easily can be called that, lies both in a reacquaintance of students with themselves as *thinkers* and in prioritizing the *experience* of education over its documentation. Bringing reflection of the sort I have described to the classroom addresses the former concern. In regard to the experiential *ethos* of the latter point, Heidegger (1968) offers this supportive distinction:

Teaching is more difficult than learning because what teaching calls for is this: to let learn. The real teacher, in fact, lets nothing else be learned than—learning. His [sic] conduct, therefore, often produces the impression that we properly learn nothing from him, if by “learning” we now suddenly understand merely the procurement of useful information. The teacher is ahead of his apprentices in this alone, that he has still far more to learn than they—he has to learn to let them learn. (p. 15)

Learning to learn demands students' (and teachers') patience, investment, and self-discipline. As an example of incorporating this *ethos* into teaching, I will offer my own situation—the first-year writing classroom. In my case, the phenomenology of students' composing, reading, collaborating with peers, and assessment must come to reveal to students their *own* mode of being.

The composing process drives the everyday composition classroom. As a mode of thinking that brings ideas or entities into the open, reflection reveals the composing process as not just the engine for producing documents but as a recursive, reiterative path on which students manifest their thinking for themselves and others. In composing, students both project themselves and become themselves. Their recognition of this self-reflexive correspondence should be a process paramount to the course. For novices in particular, this path should be broad, tentative, and as marked by failed attempts as demarcated with victories. For students to think deeply about the writing tasks they encounter, they must be able to grapple with ideas at their own individual paces; openness to possibilities—of the kind Heidegger and Gadamer describe—demands patient deliberation over time. The phenomenology of reflection suggests that the budgeting of time for learning in the academy must be a more fluid and less lock-step configuration; however, on an institutional level, this attitude toward time is difficult to find. At the level of classroom pedagogy, one familiar method of self-pacing I use is students' construction of revised essay portfolios. Such portfolios constitute the heart of my writing courses. Unlike many teachers, I do not require a mid-term portfolio assessment; at that early juncture, I feel students are not yet fluent enough in their revision techniques to be graded. While I and students' classmates offer commentary for revision beginning in the first weeks of the semester, students may choose to revise earlier drafts in any number of ways as they experiment with writing strategies throughout the quarter. They are free to transform their essays at their own pace until, of course, the end of the term. However, I do periodically check their writing notebooks for revisions in-progress, encouraging weekly effort and intermediate drafts and discouraging the procrastinator's end-of-term madness.

A broader accommodation for self-paced learning I have suggested to my faculty is the creation of a rising-junior portfolio as prerequisite for exit from core curriculum writing courses. Because scheduling may prohibit them from completing first-year writing in one year, students would be given two years to prepare anthologies of their best efforts, pacing their work as they see fit within that period. In this scenario, first-year writing courses would ingrain in students not just skills but an attitude about themselves as *authors* who require time to write "books." Within that regimen of disciplined self-pacing, when the inevitable experience-blockers arise, such as "I have nothing to say," or "I see no purpose in writing this," or "Nobody would *ever* want to read this," time can be allotted to fully question the source of these deadends with writing teachers and tutors.

In addition, finding discourse modes that invite a great deal of dialogue, such as interviews and fieldwork as a kind of primary research, and locating real audiences who can respond to or even act upon students' ideas can deepen students' investment in the composing process. Asking questions and generating

possible answers—concomitant with openness—become immediate to their experience in these contexts and so nurture reflection. In my own classes, I find that mid-term and end-of-quarter class anthologies, prepared for classmates, prompt careful reflection in the composing process, particularly revision. When students feel fully engaged in the writing task for which they must project possibilities, composing is a task more happily and patiently revisited. My responsibility is to design prompts that, of course, motivate purposeful reflection, but, as the experience is to be *theirs*, I offer my composition students a degree of autonomy in generating, selecting, and modifying essay topics. For example, I allow disenchanted readers to create, with my help, their *own* reading lists, as long as they can bring their responses profitably to our topical and thematic class discussions.

Finally, to experiment with different tactics in drafting, students must generate and explore ideas in a low-risk environment. Graded evaluation that arrives too soon before the ripeness of students' ideas can extinguish the appetite for more composing experiences. Ann Berthoff (1982), in her text *Forming, Thinking, Writing: The Composing Imagination*, claims that "the composing process rather than a composition is [the student's proper] concern" (p. 13). Berthoff is not troubled if students' essays do not come to closure, asserting in an often-quoted line that more is learned "from a dozen starts than from a single finished job" (p. 4). To me, this is a reflective stance, open to possibilities; Berthoff prioritizes the *event* of learning while recognizing the possibility of closure. In composition courses, this event is manifested in conferences, students' notes, freewriting, and in rough and "finished" drafts. I review this evidence, encouraging with my commentary process and change. Such opportunities for flexibility with and receptivity to the chaos that accompanies composing invoke the experience of thinking.

In regard to remaining open to reading texts, reflection provides ways to be flexible and receptive, but it demands patient, disciplined practice. Instead of resigning themselves to the role of passive recipients, students must cast themselves as participants in a dialogue with texts, regardless of how distanced from their experiences the texts might seem. In my own classes, reading journals offer ample space for this dialogue. The roadblocks to thoughtful reading are many, not the least of which is students' lack of familiarity with the printed page and its discourse conventions. This can be overcome by posing questions that bring these textual distinctions to light: guide questions, prepared by teachers *and* students, can motivate reflection on matters of historical context. Guide questions are a staple in both my writing and literature courses. But, even when students enjoy ample opportunity to interact with readings, we have all witnessed the more destructive barrier to encountering texts: "I cannot relate to this text, so it is just not worth reading." Gadamer (1990), drawing from the work of philosopher/critic R.G. Collingwood, suggests a dialectical twist that may help to at least draw the disaffected student into conversation with a text. Gadamer states, "We can understand a text only when we have understood the question to which it is an answer" (p. 370). Articulating such a question not only illuminates the construction of any given text and the subtleties of its historicity, but such an inquiry also reveals the questions important to any group of historical readers. In

reflecting upon the many possibilities for questions to which a text is an answer, even the most reticent reader will be faced with drawing into proximity her self-disclosive line of inquiry with the text's response. The comparison should be worthy of reflection.

Like dialogue with texts, collaboration with peers should be both self-reflexive and other-directed. Kenneth Bruffee (1980) rightly asserts that, "Peer criticism is the most *real* writing students will ever do as students" (p. 115)—purposeful and accommodating an immediate audience. Many studies, such as Martin Nystrand and Deborah Brandt's (1989), have revealed how empowering peer-critiquing can be: students come to see each other as collaborators and revision as "reconceptualization"; when instructors are the sole evaluators, teachers become "judges," and the process of revising is reduced to "editing" (p. 212). Perhaps what Nystrand and Brandt indeed confirmed was that, with their peers, students experience more readily what Gadamer (1990) defines as the "dialectic of reciprocity" (pp. 359–360): an experience with "the other" that "let[s] [her or him] really say something to us" (p. 361). Gadamer states that in speaking to one another,

Here is where openness belongs. But ultimately this openness does not exist only for the person who speaks; rather, anyone who listens is fundamentally open. Without such openness to one another there is no genuine bond. Belonging together always also means being able to listen to one another. When two people understand each other, this does not mean that one person "understands" the other. Similarly, "to hear and obey someone" . . . does not mean simply that we do blindly what the other desires. We call such a person slavish . . . Openness to the other, then, involves recognizing that I myself must accept some things that are against me, even though no one else forces me to do so. (p. 361)

Reflection can support peer collaboration. In my own classes, I ask students to systematically explain in their own words what peers presented to them, locating the common ground and also the dissensus in students' commentary. They present their interactions to me; I, in turn, pose questions about their accounts. The foundation of this reflection demands patience: listening is hard work. What does their understanding of their peers reveal about their *own* thinking? Class journals in print or on e-mail can allow such reflective questioning, re-statement, and repositioning to flourish. The prompts we offer students for their work together should promote purposeful reflection and allow students to *really have something to say* to one another—perhaps something that "counts" alongside the writer's self-assessment and the teacher's appraisal of the writer's performance. This is a level of investment and responsibility rarely afforded peer commentary. When the inevitable disagreements arise, the *ethos* of peer collaboration should be a reflective, Gadamerian one: listen, re-state the understanding, learn about the other, define one's own place, and, most importantly, build the often tenuous but necessary bridge. This approach is at once dialogic and dialectical—a mode of inquiry in itself.

The same should be said of assessment. Ideally, assessment should take on the energy of good conversation, an interchange between two interested participants. In my own first-year writing classes, I ask that students maintain with me an assessment log that records their self-assessments of drafts, my commentary, and their responses to and questions about my responses. Through this sort of dialogue, I hope my students not only will sharpen my diagnostic abilities as an evaluator but also identify for themselves both the rigors of reflecting upon their efforts and the authority I offer them in setting the course of assessment. In addition to being dialogic, assessment should embody a dialectic, in particular, the same dialectic pedagogy promotes: an interactive, transformative *experience* with language. In this regard, assessment techniques should be qualified by this question: does this technique open students to and foster an appetite for new experiences with thinking and writing—for more participation? Traditional grading—A's through F's—in its concern for alignment with defined academic expectations, implies that such alignment is an end in itself, a sufficiency. But can assessment encourage students to move beyond the comfortable repose of sufficiencies to remain eager for more experiences, despite conflicts in expectations and outcomes? In my own teaching, I attribute value to the process of communicating with students in our shared log; building and reflecting upon the assessment log are at the heart of our work together. Assessment is a conversational mode of inquiry for us. With the rigors of this sort of assessment in mind, I recommend grade-free first-year writing courses in which students perhaps would negotiate their path toward not just a prescribed quality of writing but a quantity—a repertoire, a manuscript portfolio, an anthology of fieldwork—of essay types addressed to a variety of real audiences. As I noted earlier, production of this anthology would be their sole responsibility in first-year composition, with instructors acting as guides to options for preparing such a collection. As the voice of experience, instructors could dictate not grades but the constitution of a well-rounded portfolio which would reveal a range of students' thinking and writing skills. In the same way students work together to prepare "class magazines" for publication, so might they commit to publishing, for example, their autobiographies as thinkers. Such portfolios of essays can be the locus of active *inquiry* about the terrain of learning as it relates to assessment, providing perhaps the most open avenue to Gadamer's concept of experience: students would be free to have as many encounters with making texts as they choose, strengthening with each revision their own flexibility in relation to generating new texts. They would not be penalized for becoming "experienced" at their own pace. In addition, and more importantly, students would negotiate with their instructors to render this binary determination before exiting first-year writing: *ready or not*. Defining readiness implies a full-rounded appreciation of *thinkers*, not just their rankings.

As we define it today, first-year English roots that which defines students' college experience: the making manifest of their own thinking for themselves and others. It is a "free space," as Gadamer (1992) calls it, and, even though "Bureaucratized teaching and learning systems dominate the scene, . . . it is everyone's task to find his [or her] free space. The task of our human life in general is to find free spaces and learn to move therein" (p. 59). Reflection offers

a space for rigorous, open-ended exploration of a multiplicity of writing experiences, experiences that both foster students' voices and invite them to experiment with and participate in the discourse of the academy. Students may reach an understanding in their dialogues with their teacher, their texts, and their peers, which, according to Gadamer (1990), "is not merely a matter of putting oneself forward and successfully asserting one's own point of view, but being transformed into a communion in which we do not remain what we were" (p. 379). This communion, concomitant with students' patient and self-disciplined reflection, should be at the heart of first-year composition. However, the ready appetite for experience that such transformations may perpetuate is a life-long pursuit. 🍄

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